

Bellows

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{3: the pleated expansible part in a camera

My body has not wavered in this place for hundreds of years. My body but not my
voice. }

{When Nana, my mother's mother, passed away, she entered the equal-country of my
grandmother, my father's mother. *Here's where our people were in the 1800's, in the 1700's, in the
1600's, in the 1500s*, Nana might say. She loved genealogy. Gossip.

My grandmother, even in this new country, would have only her breath.

We go back to Georgia, Dad tells me once. *Before that?* I ask. He doesn't know. Can't. }

{A customer, white, my dad's age, tells me that she spent all last night, Devil's Night, running
back and forth from one Chicago police officer to another, fighting fire with fire. Yelling.

You can see her exhalation. She is livid that men would arrest black children for doing what children do.

What do you think about that? she asks me. I can't leave the register. She's already paid.

Yeab okay. That's messed up.

Isn't that terrible?

Yeab.

This conversation won't end until I lash out. Snap. Lose my job. Become heated. Lose my job. Cry.

It's not okay.

Yeab.

It's terrible.

It's terrible. }

{Remember that black lives were not allowed to speak their language. They were not allowed certain kinds of breath. They might cough but they could never sigh. They might inhale but they were never to swell. On land.}

{Dad's brother has died. I have never seen my dad cry, any black man cry, except, maybe, when he entered the room to tell us. There weren't any tears, but he was crying.}

{There are more means to die than there are ways to express it. In paint or words or genuflections. Maybe every action we take is in response or remembrance.

My white nana ate onion and pickle sandwiches. When I eat them, it is a response to a hunger born from depression—as she, in a mirror, ate as response to a hunger born from the depression.

It's an impossible beast: we can never recover the people we lost. But we have voices. We reclaim breath.}

{2: archaic - lungs

When 45's electoral votes were being tallied, I was devastated. People said speak up.

What more could I do? I'd been speaking.

I cried. }

{Imagine the history book of your people is missing the cover. Someone has torn it off, and the table of contents, and the index, and a good portion of the beginning of the book—who knows how many chapters, because the chapters are blackened, and the spine has been taken.

The top page on the stack of your people's papers, as far back as you can remember, is titled:

"American Slavery." You're in the third grade.

This is all there is.}

{1: a device that produces a strong current of air when its sides are pressed together. Ex. The bellows were used to start the fire.}